



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ART FOR ART'S SAKE IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE

"Art for art's sake" presupposes spontaneity. The artist who creates literature for its own sake is impelled by some "fine frenzy within" to voice his thoughts or emotions. His art is expressive. He cares nothing for the effect of his work, save upon himself. He aims not to teach nor uplift nor point a moral. If he be a true artist, he employs a rare skill in making the form of his composition a perfect medium of expression, producing that subtle harmony between form and content which marks any piece of literature as artistic. Thus there are two conditions under which art for its own sake may appear in literature: the impelling motive must be for spontaneous expression; its creation must be attended by the deliberate, painstaking skill in the manipulation of materials which makes for art. In the fulfilment of the first condition, the early literature of the South surpassed that of the North and exhibited a fair promise of great things to come. In the neglect of the second condition lay its blight during long years. In its present fulfilment of both lies its hope for the future.

New England literature was from the first impressive rather than expressive. It consisted largely of ponderous, awe-inspiring sermons and lengthy, erudite tracts upon abstruse and solemn subjects. It was obviously literature with a purpose, appealing only to the intellect. Therein lay its weakness as literature. But in its concentration and earnestness, it sowed the seed of its future strength, for from it grew that wonderful industry in writing which later made New England the literary centre of the continent. Whenever the South adds the seriousness and industry of the North to its own spontaneity and inspiration, we may look for pure literature.

Out of the varying motives of the literature of the two sections—the impressiveness of the North and the expressiveness of the South—grew two resulting schools of literature. Inevitably the whole general trend of Northern literature has been toward realism, and just as certainly the literature of the South has from the beginning leaned toward the romantic, Nature

has assisted in bringing about this diversity. To the Puritan she exhibited her sterner self in a wild ruggedness of landscape and a bleak, rigorous climate. No wonder that we find little or no nature-worship in the earlier New England writings. It took years of adjustment to develop the Thoreau temperament which could look beyond her repellent exterior and find a heart of charm revealed in nature's harsher moods. The Virginian she wooed with all the wiles of her more alluring self, caressing him with a soft, genial atmosphere in a slumberous land of beautiful sunshiny luxuriance, and from the beginning his writings show his appreciation of nature. How perfectly their different settings seem to fit the varied temperaments of Puritan and Cavalier! One wonders what would have been the result in literature had the stern and righteous Puritan been submitted to the exotic, slumbersome charm of the Southland, and had the romantic, pleasure-loving Cavalier found himself face to face with the racking trials and discomforts of New England. Perhaps, under such conditions, inspiration and industry might have had an earlier meeting in our literature.

There is little of "art for art's sake" in true realism, for its purpose supersedes its inspiration—its ponderous aim annihilates spontaneous expression. That the temperament of the Cavaliers when submitted to the influence of Southern climate and scenery made for romance becomes evident in the very earliest Southern writings. It is significant that the first bit of literature which America produced was Captain John Smith's "True Relation of Virginia," and that this is a highly romantic piece of writing. Can one doubt the *romance* of his story of Pocahontas? There is, moreover, a romantic atmosphere about the entire work, even when it makes a pretension to historical fact, a something primitive and spontaneous—romantic in the self-expressive impulse which produced its narration of thrilling adventures and pictures of a new life in a new world. That his contemporaries felt the romantic charm of Smith's book is evident from the fact that it became the inspiration of a great many tales and plays—so many in fact that Smith was led to exclaim, "They have acted my fatal tragedies upon the stage and racked my relations at their pleasure." Can one imagine the

highly intellectual first writings of New England thus becoming the inspiration of narrators and playwrights?

There followed other Southern authors who wrote their experiences and impressions of the new world, and in the works of them all we find something of this romance, this inspiration and spontaneity that make for true art. Perhaps the most striking example of these elements is found in the work of William Strachey. One reads his vivid, impressive picture of a storm:—

“For four and twenty hours the storm, in a restless tumult, had blown so exceedingly, as we could not apprehend in our imaginations any possibility of greater violence, yet did we still find it, not only more terrible, but more constant, fury added to fury, and one storm urging a second, more outrageous than the former, whether it so wrought upon our fears, or indeed met with new forces. Sometimes strikes in our Ship amongst women, and passengers not used to such hurly and discomforts, made us look one upon the other with troubled hearts, and panting bosoms, our clamors drowned in the winds, in thunder. Prayers might well be in the hearts and lips, but drowned in the outsides of the officers,—nothing heard that could give comfort, nothing seen that might encourage hope.”

It is easy to believe that this work may have inspired Shakespeare to write his *Tempest*—that, from its effective and suggestive descriptions, the immortal bard caught the motive of what was to be his supreme artistic creation.

These very early Southern writers created literature accidentally in their efforts to set down facts and experiences. A little later the South was to give us in George Sandys our first writer of literature for its own sake. In his translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Sandys achieved a bit of pure literature which was destined to remain conspicuous for some decades to come, because it was the one product of early American letters which combined real inspiration with an execution that was artistic and methodical. Great would have been the flowering of Southern literature had his successors possessed his rare artistic ability, his great carefulness in the handling of his theme, his wonderful industry. The last is perhaps the most marvelous, when one remembers that he produced this work amid the many

demands of other occupations, stealing the hours of the night for its accomplishment;—another example of what industry in literature can add to the inspiration of the Southland.

Sandys's poem was a translation; but in the early literature of the South we can also find the first *original* poem of real literary merit. It is a little elegy on the death of Bacon found in the *Burwell Papers* and of unknown authorship, but so artistic, so truly inspired that it serves as one more example of the truth of my statement that early Southern writers were true artists—obscure prophets of better things to come.

“Death, why so cruel? What! no other way
To manifest thy spleen, but thus to slay
Our hopes of safety, liberty, our all,
Which, through thy tyranny, with him must fall
To its late chaos?

“ Now we must complain,
Since thou in him hast more than thousands slain,
Whose lives and safeties did so much depend
On him their life, with him their lives must end.

“Who now must heal those wounds or stop that blood
The heathen made, and drew into a flood?
Who is't must plead our cause? Nor trump, nor drum,
Nor deputations; these, alas, are dumb,
And cannot speak.”

There followed for the South a long period of literary barrenness. During the same period in New England, industry, prosperity, community interests, and above all liberal education of the masses were uniting to produce a Northern literature which though not exactly pure literature, with art for its own sake as a motive, was nevertheless prolific, purposeful, and of varied merit. In the South the lack of community interests, the isolation of plantations, the neglect of education, and the general aversion to industry resulted in a dearth of literature. There were writers and a few of them were genuinely inspired, but they lacked that great essential—industry in literature, and taking up the pen in a desultory fashion, negligent of method and art, they produced a negligible literature. There was in the South for long years a queer prejudice against writing for money. Literature was an accomplishment when approached as a mere pastime, but it became a blot on the social escutcheon

when undertaken as a profession. There resulted nothing important nor epoch-making. As was natural, the only literary output of any recognizable excellence was of a lyric nature. Again spontaneity, the desire for self-expression gave rise to a few poems of artistic merit, for classic models had taught even the desultory poets to have a regard for form, and the inspiration of nature in her kindest moods gave a charming warmth and color to these songs. It is regrettable that there were so few of them.

Exceptions prove the rule, and it is significant that the exception in this case should be Edgar Allan Poe, Southern by birth and temperament—Northern by training. That he belonged to a period when Southern literature was at its worst, when its inspiration was feeble and its few writers approached it in a desultory manner, but that he nevertheless with true genius as a motive, with art for art's sake as an ideal, and with indefatigable industry as a means, raised himself to the very pinnacle of fame in American literature, proves the truth of my theory—that when the South adds to its own inspiration a truly artistic handling of materials, it produces a pure literature.

Unlike his Southern contemporaries, Poe devoted all his talents to literature. But truly Southern was his underlying conception of literature and especially of poetry—that “pleasure, not truth” was its object. However Northern his training, New England literature cannot claim him. He broke down its bars of purpose and truth in poetry, and preferred to roam in the green pastures of pleasure. But with it all, his devotion to the *art* of writing, his infinite care of detail, his groping for perfection of form was a ruling passion in all he wrote, both poetry and prose. The result has made him the most world-famous of all our writers. Swinburne has said of American literature, “Once as yet, and once only, has there sounded out of it all one pure note of original song—worth singing and echoed from the singing of no other man; a note of song neither wide nor deep but utterly true, rich, clear, and native to the singer; the short exquisite music, subtle and simple and sombre and sweet, of Edgar Poe.” Thus Poe stands out as the supreme example of what art for art's sake can do for the literature of the South.

We note that Poe owed to the North his industry in literature. But the day has come when Southern writers are finding both inspiration and industry in their own Southland. It took the great upheaval of the Civil War to bring about this change in their attitude toward literature. In the decades preceding the war the North was in the midst of a great transcendental movement, its long period of industry of thought and deed was flowering into a wonderful literature that embodied its emotions and ideas. There was among men the divine discontent and inspired dissatisfaction that had been voiced by Carlyle and echoed by Emerson. But the South remained passive and contented, uttering its few charming melodies, until suddenly came the overwhelming shock of the war, sweeping away forever the past pleasant quiescence, shattering the old ideals, laying the land low under its horrors, but clearing the air for the inrush of new and invigorating ideas and the tonic force of industrialism. And with it came a new literature. At first, the new note of sincerity became evident in the poetry of Timrod and Hayne. The new regard for industry in art showed itself strikingly in Sidney Lanier, in whose works emotional sentiment and strength of purpose unite to produce a rare perfection. Gone is the desultory indifference of the old South when one of its poets, too weak to feed himself—dying—can utter a song like the following:—

“In my sleep I was fain of their fellowship, fain
Of the live-oak, the marsh, and the main.
The little green leaves would not let me alone in my sleep;
Up-breathed from the marshes, a message of range and of sweep
Interwoven with waftures and of wild sea-liberties, drifting,
Came through the lapped leaves sifting, sifting,
Came to the gates of sleep.
Then my thoughts, in the dark of the dungeon-keep
Of the Castle of Captives hid in the City of Sleep,
Upstarted, by twos and by threes assembling:
The gates of sleep fell a-trembling
Like as the lips of a lady that forth falter *yes*,
Shaken with happiness:
The gates of sleep stood wide.”

Truly in Lanier *conscience* came into Southern literature.

In 1870, with the advent of industrialism into the South, began also industry in literature. There has arisen a generation of

authors who, like the earlier Southern writers, are finding their inspiration in their own surroundings. And to them literature has become a life-profession. They are earnest, serious, and sincere. They are true artists in their devotion to literature and the skill with which they are handling their chosen themes. They are giving a new and dominant tone to American letters. Gone is the apathy. Close at hand are various quaint and interesting people. The land glows with a verdant, inspiring beauty. Out of the past steal forth romantic figures of Cavaliers and soldiers. Grimly and overshadowing all stalks the epic spectre of the Civil War and "literature loves a lost cause." It seems safe to predict that America's purest literature is to come out of the Southland.

A. M. CONWAY.

Philadelphia, Pa.